

Psychological support for care home staff during the coronavirus pandemic

Guide for public health professionals

Purpose

This brief guide provides a structure and general approach to enable you to have productive and supportive conversations with care home managers about psychological support for their staff. It includes principles of supportive conversations, and suggested wording to support those principles.

The guide is aimed at the core and wider public health workforce supporting care homes through Covid-19 in Yorkshire and the Humber. It has been compiled by Dr Roseanna Brady, a member of the Health Psychology Exchange, and Philippa Boynton, Quality and Patient Safety Lead, East Riding of Yorkshire CCG. The guide is supported by Public Health England Y&H and the Association of Directors of Public Health Network (Y&H).

Agenda

Here are the six agenda items for discussing psychological support of health and social care staff based on British Psychological Society guidance on providing psychological support for healthcare staff during the Coronavirus pandemic, the WHO guidance on psychological first aid, and Support the Workers guidance on psychological support during crises¹.

- Personal safety
- Physical wellbeing
- Opportunities to decompress
- Psychological first aid
- Decision making (ethics)
- Leadership and communications

Principles

Be open, empathetic and supportive

Given the experiences of care home managers during the early weeks of the pandemic, it's important to acknowledge those difficulties when managers speak about them. This will help to validate their feelings. Avoid any temptation to defend or explain. Managers will value being listened to and being empathised with.

If you hear something which is clearly mistaken, you can address that gently *after* the manager has had time to express themselves, and *after* you have acknowledged that it must indeed have been very hard. Only correct the misinformation in the context of this conversation if it's actually important to do so.

¹ Further details: The psychological needs of the care home workforce during covid-19
<https://www.yhphnetwork.co.uk/links-and-resources/behavioural-science-hub-yh/the-psychological-support-needs-of-the-care-home-workforce-during-covid-19/>

Firstly, how is the care manager being supported?

If you haven't already done so, it's important to ask.

Many care home managers are carrying an emotional burden which puts them at risk of psychological injury. It's ok to ask how a person is feeling. Asking people how they are is an integral part of psychological first aid². When you do, be prepared to listen, and acknowledge the way they feel. It's very likely that in being able to express themselves and in being listened to, some of that burden felt by care home managers will be lifted and trust will be established.

"I realise you are thinking a lot about how to support your staff and patients. How about you – how are you doing?"

(allow time to listen and empathise and validate. If you think the person is in need to additional psychological support, make sure you provide information about where they can access that.)

Introduce the agenda

"We've been looking at how we can work more strategically with care home managers from now on to support psychological wellbeing of staff. A group of health psychologists have put together a list of six key areas where psychological wellbeing of healthcare staff can be supported.

I know you've been doing a lot to support your staff already. So, what would you say are the most important areas you'd like support with now and going forward through the next stage of the pandemic?"

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Explore and agree the agenda

While it's important to explain the agenda, allow the manager time to add to it before you start. It's likely that any issues the manager would like to add to the agenda will already be covered by one of the six items, but it's still important to ask. For example:

"It must be taking a huge effort to manage things right now and I realise you're doing a lot of things really well. Perhaps if we go through the six areas and you can let me know which ones you think it would be most helpful to look at?"

(manager response)

"The main areas we can look at are: Safety (meaning safety of staff – actual and perceived), Physical wellbeing, Opportunities for respite/decompression during shifts, Psychological First Aid, Decision Making, and Leadership and Communications.

Is there anything not in that list that you'd like to discuss?"

² The World Health Organisation guide to psychological first aid is at:
https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/44615/9789241548205_eng.pdf;jsessionid=DD9402AC0E3F33FB2D00D1859BC78BC1?sequence=1

Use the elicit-provide-elicite approach to the conversation

Open questions will help to establish what the manager already knows/has done. A conversation might go something like this, for example:

Elicite - *“I can see that you’re quite concerned about (e.g.) safety. Perhaps if you can let me know what you’re already doing we can talk about that today and see how we might help you to get more support for that?”*

(manager response)

Provide – *“So, we know that safety is about actual safety - PPE, Testing, and so on – and also how staff feel about safety. Even though there might be enough PPE right now, for example, staff will need to know that, and may need reassurance that there is a plan to replace stocks. Or they might be worried if they are shielding family or if they themselves feel vulnerable.*

Elicite – *“How are your team feeling about these things right now?”*

(manager response)

Recognise and validate what has already been achieved

It’s always important to validate what people do well – it’s especially so when people may feel they have been ‘abandoned’ during the early weeks of the pandemic. Be aware of the difference between praise (not helpful) and validation (very helpful). For example:

(manager tells you that all staff, including those at home, have been regularly updated on availability of PPE)

“I can see that must be very helpful in reducing any fears they might have, and it will help to reduce anxiety because they know you will keep them informed.” (Validation)

NOT *“You’ve done a great job. Well Done!”* (Praise – and likely to be felt as patronising)

Avoid undermining/judging – identify strengths and opportunities

Your role in conversations about psychological support is to help managers to identify their strengths and access resources that will help them to protect themselves and their staff from psychological harm.

Be aware of your boundaries

Be clear about your role in the conversation. You do not need to be an expert in psychological support to be helpful. Be open and honest about your own knowledge and about the limitations of what you can do. You can be particularly helpful in signposting them to useful resources they might not have time to explore. You may choose to advocate for them if that is within your professional remit.